



## **A high-speed future for California**

### **Rail proposal is antidote for rising gas prices, dirty air, stagnant economy.**

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High-speed rail won the pole position on the November ballot -- it was named Proposition 1 when the secretary of state assigned numbers to the 11 initiatives voters will consider. That's no guarantee of victory, but the momentum is clearly building.

The proposal to build an 800-mile system of 200-mph trains linking Southern and Northern California, by way of the Valley, has made a great deal of sense throughout its two-decade gestation. Proposition 1, the \$9.95 billion bond measure, is the necessary first step.

High-speed rail will be an engine of economic development that we badly need in this state, creating tens of thousands of jobs in both its construction and its operation.

It will have a dramatic impact on our environment, removing thousands of cars from California's highways. Less congestion will make the remaining vehicles more efficient for those that remain on the road. Conservative estimates suggest millions of barrels of oil could be saved annually, and as much as 22 billion pounds of carbon dioxide kept out of the atmosphere.

The rail system would also reduce the need for many short- and medium-haul airline flights, which pollute the atmosphere at an astonishing rate.

Now, with gasoline at \$4.50 a gallon and rising, high-speed rail is no longer just a good idea. It's imperative.

Enthusiasm for passenger rail travel is growing rapidly in California and the nation. Ridership on Amtrak is increasing, even with the shortcomings of the underfunded system. In fiscal year 2007, 25 million passengers traveled on Amtrak trains, a record that is sure to be surpassed when this year's numbers are tallied. Locally, ridership on Amtrak's San Joaquin line rose 21.2% in May, compared with May 2007.

Congress is getting on board. Next year's transportation bill could include as much as \$60 billion for high-speed rail projects. Because California is well ahead of the rest of the nation, it's reasonable to expect a good share of that money would be added to the funds from the bond measure -- if it passes in November.

The numbers all add up on high-speed rail. It's much more efficient than driving or flying. It's a job producer. It will help clean the air. It will connect the Valley to the rest of the state in a way that's never been done before. It's more comfortable and less stressful than dealing with crowded airports or congested highways.

There are broader themes to the high-speed rail debate. Opponents of the proposal seem to believe that the price of gasoline will be coming back down soon. It may dip some, but never to the comfortable levels of past decades.

Airlines are in crisis. Fares and other charges are going through the roof, and that's not going to get any better. In addition to all its environmental advantages, high-speed rail offers a cheaper alternative to air travel, with less hassle.

Opponents of high-speed rail act as if the alternative to high-speed rail and its cost is to do nothing. That's absurd, as absurd as the notion that we just need to build more freeways and expand airports, and keep burning all that cheap fuel. Not only would that make air quality problems worse in the state, it would be much more expensive than building high-speed rail -- and it wouldn't work.

California needs to focus on the 21st century, not dwell on the solutions of the past. What once served us well is no longer sufficient. Advocates of high-speed rail -- people who believe in California's future -- have a selling job to do with voters. Let's get it started.

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